

UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
6 October 1986

ISRAEL'S NUCLEAR STOCKPILE UNDERESTIMATED, PAPER SAYS
LONDON

Israel's nuclear stockpile is many times larger than Western intelligence experts have thought and the country may now be able to produce hydrogen bombs capable of destroying entire cities, a newspaper said.

In a front-page story, the Sunday Times said Israel has hidden a nuclear warhead factory from spy satellites by burying it beneath a harmless looking building beside the Dimona nuclear reactor in the Negev desert.

The paper said Israel now ranks as the world's sixth most powerful nuclear power after the United States, the Soviet Union, Britain, France and China.

It also said Israel has "almost certainly begun manufacturing (more powerful) thermonuclear weapons, with yields big enough to destroy entire cities."

The newspaper quoted scientists who calculate that Israel has produced at least 100, and maybe as many as 200, nuclear weapons during the past 20 years.

If Israel had produced 200 nuclear weapons, it would have a nuclear arsenal 10 times as large as previously estimated by the CIA, the article said.

It has long been suspected that Israel possessed nuclear weapons but Israel has refused comment on the matter. It again refused to comment on the Sunday Times report.

The Times printed pictures of the secret warhead factory -- known as Machon 2 -- and said nuclear scientists have scrutinized them, declaring them authentic.

It said the warhead factory is equipped with French plutonium extracting technology, which takes nuclear byproducts from the Dimona reactor in the Negev and uses them in the production of nuclear weapons.

The newspaper said it based its report on photos and testimony provided by Mordechai Vanunu, 31, an Israeli who worked as a nuclear technician for nearly 10 years before he was laid off last November with 180 other Dimona workers during a cost-cutting drive.

Israeli Communications Minister Amnon Rubinstein told the Times it appeared Vanunu appeared to have leaked the story in revenge for being fired.

The Times said Theodore Taylor, former head of the Pentagon's atomic weapons test program, studied the photos and the testimony of Vanunu and declared them authentic.

"There should no longer be any doubt that Israel is, and for at least a decade, has been a full-fledged nuclear weapons state," Taylor told the newspaper. "The Israeli nuclear weapons program is considerably more advanced than indicated by any previous report or conjectures of which I am aware."

Avi Pazner, spokesman for Foreign Minister Yitzhak Shamir, repeated Israel's position it would not be the first country to introduce nuclear weapons to the Middle East, early editions of The Times said today.